

St Denis and India's Dance Renaissance *

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Between 8 January and 9 May 1926, the Denishawn Dance Company performed over one hundred dance concerts in India¹. These performances by Ruth St Denis, Ted Shawn, and eight dancers were not subsidized by any government but were supported by the sale of tickets and occasionally by royal patrons such as the Nizam of Hyderabad and the Gaekwad of Baroda. The Denishawn dance concerts were presented in theatres in Calcutta, Bombay, Karachi, Quetta, Lahore, Kanpur, Lucknow, Delhi, Jabalpur, Allahabad, Secunderabad, and Madras. There is no question that the Denishawn tour in India was successful and popular since it was extended considerably beyond expectations, and cities already visited were returned to as a result of demand. Rave notices from the local press are cited in Ruth St Denis's biography and Jane Sherman's extensive descriptions of the tour and the Denishawn repertory, based on her diaries and recollections.

Both Ted Shawn and Walter Terry have stated that St Denis's visit to India in 1926 with the Denishawn Company of dancers was catalytic. It rekindled interest and pride in India's now flourishing dance forms. Terry says for example that "Ruth St. Denis' non-authentic Indian dance helped reawaken the subcontinent's slumbering dance art and [was] at least partially responsible for the renaissance of India's respect for its 2,000 year old heritage"².

If these claims are indeed valid, then why is so little known about this influence in India today? Apparently Ruth St Denis's non-authentic impressions of Indian dance were indeed a great triumph in India. She was hailed by the *Times of India* with "rapturous applause and genuine enthusiasm"³. Her *Dance of the Black and Gold Sari* provoked riots. Yet most dancers in India today are unfamiliar with her name, whereas Pavlova, who also visited India within a year of St Denis, is remembered with reverence. Rukmini Devi, the founder of Kalakshetra, insisted that only Pavlova can be credited with the pivotal contribution to India's rediscovery of its own dance forms⁴. Only the dance historians Mohan Khokar and Sunil Kothari have acknowledged St Denis's interest in Indian dances, and the Denishawn trip to India⁵.

In Europe and in the United States, St Denis's dances drew accolades from travelling Indians and others including Ustad Inayat Khan, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Sarojini Naidu, and the Maharajas of Kapurthala and Cooch-Bihar. However, the patron of arts, Jamshed Bhabha, recalls that when taken to see the

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Denishawn dancers at the Excelsior Theatre in Bombay he was just a little boy and that the show was vaudevillian, inconsequential kitsch, and in this opinion he is not alone⁶.

Puzzling discrepancies also emerge from historical and biographical accounts of the state of Indian dance in the early 20th century. Pavlova with her husband Victor Dandré, Shawn, St Denis and Sherman indicate that the Indian dances were debased and the pure art dance was all but extinct⁷. These views clearly do not correspond with those of present-day dancers and dance scholars in India⁸.

Could it be that these divergent perceptions are the result of some fascinating unrecognized undercurrents? Between the national chauvinism or the corresponding paternalism of writers of history and the personal egotism of individual performers, is it possible to extricate a balanced and fair evaluation of what really happened when Ruth St Denis visited India 50 years ago?

Ted Shawn, St Denis, and a young dancer on this Denishawn tour, Jane Sherman, all record their frustration at searching all over India for authentic Nautch. St Denis notes how after much seeking, the meeting with a Nautch dancer finally came about in Calcutta:

Today our good friend, Mr. Jenkins, secretary to the Governor General, has sleuthed down a couple of Nautch girls. It seems there are still some in captivity; but none of them have been visible to the naked eye, and we have come seven thousand miles to see them, we think it is time we got a glimpse of one.⁹

When they finally met the dancer, Bachwa Jan, her salon with its French chandeliers proved anything but a cage!¹⁰ Further, she sported an imported Parisian sari with "native edging", and "at least fifty thousand dollars worth of jewels". Jane Sherman (who was in her mid-teens then) perceived her as "an ugly old hag in her sixties, who did very little dancing in our sense of the word", but the more experienced St Denis was enraptured. From Sherman's descriptions, it can be deduced that Bachwa Jan presented *that, abhinaya*, a suggestion of *tatkar* and *tukde*, etc.¹¹ There are also excerpts from a 16-mm film recorded by Shawn during this tour showing tawdry Nautch dancers whose performances lacked any complexity, clarity, or emotional depth¹². The film includes clips of a Tamasha dancer in *ghagra* and *choli* presenting different *gat bhavs* (reportedly in the Shalimar Gardens), the Lavani/Kathak style of Nautch at the palace of the Maharaja of Kashmir, and an even briefer glimpse of two boys dressed as women dancing street Nautch in Quetta.

If complex technical and highly evolved aesthetic forms existed continuously, why was it so difficult for the Denishawn dancers to locate dancers of quality?¹³ Were they being deliberately misinformed by their British and Indian hosts?

Their perceptions are however borne out by one local eye-witness at the Denishawn performances for the Nizam in Hyderabad. My grandmother recollected that the foreign dancers wished to see Indian dancing but their Indian hosts were too embarrassed by their local Nautch and felt that there was nothing worth showing them. The hindsight offered by present-day information has shown, however, that this was not the case.



Ruth St Denis.

Courtesy: The Dance Research Collection, Lincoln Center, New York.

For example in the village of Kuchipudi, also in the erstwhile state of Hyderabad, a different tradition of dance was even then being actively performed and perpetuated. However, this dance was an integrated part of the life and rituals of the performers, and like many of the traditional forms, it was not perceived as art fit for cultural presentation. It was only after the 1940s that such dances came to be performed outside their local social and geographic parameters and urban Indians learned about their existence¹⁴.

Consequently, it is unlikely that the Denishawn dancers or other European visitors could ever come across this dance. According to accounts of early English settlers of the 19th century, who much preceded Denishawn and Pavlova in India, Nautch dances were held as entertainment for all male European visitors, who were enraptured by the dances and the dancers for their refinement, glamour, and modesty of dress. Lt Thomas Bacon, a British army officer in the early 19th century, has left a detailed description of performances, costumes and ornaments. The description reveals fascination and condescending admiration for "... this [the presentation of human feelings by Nautch dancers, which I have more than once seen depicted with a truth we could hardly expect from them]"¹⁵.

Gradually a complex picture emerges from the apparently discrepant perceptions of Western visitors, colonial Indians, and present-day historians of Indian dance. Western visitors saw only the *nautchwalis*, who danced exclusively for male audiences and performed a fetishized shadow of Kathak in north India and Sadir in the South. In both the traditions, the women dancers had come to be debased performers. More than their dance, it was their persons that were of interest to their patrons, and their movements had come to reflect this, except for a few admirable exceptions¹⁶. Simultaneously however, male exponents of the Kathak *gharanas*, most notably Achhan Maharaj, were performing for indigenous patrons in the courts of the various Nawabs and Rajas of north India, particularly Raja Chakradar Singh of Raigarh. In their case, the dance form itself was on display rather than their sexual persons, and perhaps this is why they have come to be regarded today as the possessors of the traditions and (unlike the women performers) regarded with reverence as gurus for their mastery of their art.

One of the reasons for the confusions may be linguistic. In Indian culture, the word dance has many connotations and these are indicated by different words. 'Nautch' is the Anglicized pronunciation and transliteration of the word *nāch*, and was construed to mean dance generically—any dance, classical, folk or popular. The word could refer to street-dancers whose dance was only a thin pretext for prostitution. It could also refer to high-class courtesans (*ganika*, *tawaif*) who took pride in their artistic accomplishments. It was also used with reference to the *devadasis*—women from different backgrounds who were dedicated at a very early age to dance exclusively in temples as in Orissa—who were a separate tradition. By bringing all of these together in a single word, 'Nautch', the distinctions were glossed over and dance itself was branched immoral¹⁷.

Amrit Srinivasan's recent thorough sociological study of the Devadasi community of Tamil Nadu and its recent history concurs with this blurring of distinctions¹⁸. She shows that these women had a privileged status in the political, commercial and cultural life of the community until the end of the 19th century when their trade became associated with immoral traffic in women and children. This general perception was the result, she finds, of the active political propagation for moral reforms and social purity based on the "objective and scientific" evidence of British administrators, missionaries, women's rights activists and doctors, for the most part. For example, medical publications on the physiological repercussions of practices such as early marriage were widely circulated and attracted public attention.

By demonstrating the need for such reforms, the enlightened rulers were also demonstrating that Indian men who treated their women so abominably could scarcely be trusted to govern themselves! In his book *Women and Marriage in India*, published in London as late as 1939, P. Thomas wrote: "Nobody but the hopelessly prejudiced would deny that the average twentieth-century Englishman is a superior animal to the average Indian."

The irony of the situation is that in England women activists seeking to counter social, legal, and political injustices to women were pitted in both Houses of Parliament against formidable resistance for very similar reforms! The concerns that effected the change of the status of the Devadasis reflected those of the British women activists such as reforms to raise the age of consent for girls from 13 to 21, to expose infanticide, and sexual abuse of very young girls. Just a few years before the institution of Devadasis was attacked, young girls certified as virgins by Harley Street doctors were being sold for £5!¹⁹

Katherine Mayo's book *Mother India* published in 1927—the year following the Denishawn tour—and the controversy it generated exemplified how British imperialistic attitudes and issues of male dominance were conflated with issues of self-government²⁰. The strategy embarrassed the liberal intellectual and upper-class Indians into re-perceiving their hitherto unquestioned heritage through the perceptions of their imperial rulers. 'Enlightened' local reformers by this time acquired a deep conviction that somewhere a 'pure' custom had been polluted and must be cleansed. The anti-Nautch position was seen as "either consciousness-raising or brainwashing" depending on one's point of view!²¹

Thus an unusual combination of circumstances brought about the perception that the Devadasi was exploited because of the 'irrational' custom of dedicating her person and services at a very young age to the temple/sponsor. The socio-historic complexity of the structure that enabled the Devadasi to devote herself to perfecting her art was ignored and an active campaign to discredit the Devadasi was launched.

Eventually this collapsing of morals and art into a monolithic issue by the anti-Nautch movement was fiercely opposed by E. Krishna Iyer, a Brahmin who drew attention to the beauty of the dance form, and the role of the Devadasis in preserving and perpetuating the classical aesthetic traditions. From 1927 onwards—the year after the Denishawn tour—he actively crusaded for apprecia-



*Ruth St Denis in the
Dance of the Black
and Gold Sari
(1922).*



Courtesy: Jane Sherman Lebac, New York.

*Right: Ruth St
Denis at 63 in Radha
performed at
Jacob's Pillow,
Massachusetts, in
1941, 35 years after
the work's première
(1906) in New York.*



Courtesy: Jane Sherman Lebac.

*Left: Ruth St Denis
in Incense.*

tion and rehabilitation of the Sadir form.

To look forward for a moment, the debate continued, attracting much attention in local newspapers in Madras. Some argued that raising the age of consent to over 14 was unfair to the Devadasis as by this age they would be too old to be properly trained in the dance and amounted to the state's negligence of their public professional rights. The Brahmins who were involved in running the temples saw the same act as state interference.

Under the British legislation which deliberately fostered casteism, the 'Untouchables/Depressed classes' and the pro-Nautch Brahmins had gained educational and professional advantages over 'non-Brahmin Backward Classes'. Disgruntled, the latter group joined the anti-Nautch campaign to gain support for their own political motives²². This comprehensive group included male members within the Devadasi community, who participated in performances as musicians and teachers. This section resented the wealth and social prestige that Devadasi women commanded and felt that their own artistic contributions were slighted in the process.

Finally, in 1930, Bill No. 5 was put forward by Dr Muthulaxmi Reddy, herself a reformist, non-dancing member of the same community, and was approved by the Madras Legislative Assembly²³. Devadasis were relieved of their services to the temples and their material interests were protected through land grants. Later, the Madras Devadasis Act of 1947 was passed by the Congress ministry in Madras in free India, abolishing temple dedications so that marriage became legally valid for all women of the Melakkarar/Isai Vellalla (Devadasi) community. However, by this time the anti-Nautch movement had already deprived the women artists of their independent prestige, respect and rights to property inheritance²⁴.

What was achieved by the bill was to clear the way for non-Devadasi women to study the dance. The reconstruction of the Sadir dance was undertaken by Westernized and 'Sanskritized' Brahmins, most notably Rukmini Devi Arundale. Sadir was reclaimed as Bharatanatyam, the purest and most 'authentic' traditional dance of the *Natyashastra*, effectively shifting the focus of the dance from the living tradition to texts. Beginning around 1940, many Devadasis transited to careers in the cinema, where the inhibition against higher-caste girls was still in effect. Srinivasan's well-documented account of the complex issues around the anti-Nautch movement in one southern province of India illuminates the nature of related agitations that occurred in several States more or less concurrently. Marglin's study of the Devadasis of Orissa does not focus on the anti-Nautch movement, but she does refer to anti-Nautch sentiments expressed in the *Madura Mail* of 3 November 1894²⁵.

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However, it was in 1926, before the pro-Nautch campaign had been launched but in the midst of all the agitations concerning women's bodies, that St Denis and the Denishawn dancers—innocently outside the hierarchical complexities of rela-

tionships of colonizer and colonized—made their public appearances all over India and sought out the Nautch dancers who they believed were of the same ilk as the Devadasis.

In order to reconstruct how the Denishawn company was received by audiences in India it is necessary to recall the aesthetic context in which their dancing bodies were presented. The dances that Denishawn presented in India are listed by Christina Schlundt, and appear on a programme of performances in Secunderabad for the Nizam²⁶. It opened with several of the short abstract dances by St Denis known as *Music Visualizations*, of which she wrote:

Music visualization in its purest form is the scientific translation into bodily action of the rhythmic, melodic and harmonious structure of a musical composition, without intention to in any way interpret or reveal any hidden meaning apprehended by the dancer.²⁷

Then followed Shawn's *Voices of Spring* with its striking opening tableau of figures of Greek mythology based on Botticelli's *La Primavera*, the movements of the various characters evoking the dreamy melancholy air of the famous painting. The girls were dressed in short tunics with bare legs. Then came a series of dances, mostly by Shawn, that drew their inspiration from a variety of cultures—*Cuadro Flamenco*, the American-Indian *Invocation to Thunderbird*, a suite of sketches about the American cowboy, the Hawaiian *Legend of Pallee*, and St Denis's *Japanese Flower Arrangements*. India was represented by her *Dance of the Apsarases* and *Nautch*. The programme concluded with a jointly choreographed suite of dances based on Egyptian legends²⁸.

Audiences watching these varied impressionistic sketches in India must have been curious to see how their own culture would be represented. At that time, in Europe, Indian and Asian dance was deemed so different from the European that its aesthetic concepts lay beyond the Western individual's comprehension and could therefore be ignored. This often resulted in a collapsing together of diverse cultural images in dance presentations. It is with reference to this custom that Ahmed Alley of *The Rangoon Daily News* was delighted to congratulate St Denis for discerning the difference between Indian and Egyptian dance movements:

The Indian Nautch, with Miss St. Denis and the Denishawn dancers, was a brilliant presentation, and deserves the fullest credit. The costuming was replete with a wealth of detail that reminded one of the Nautch girls of Lucknow and Agra. Miss Denis [sic] is assuredly the greatest Western exponent of Indian dancing that one has yet seen in the East... So often has the Indian dance been confused with the Egyptian movements by Western dancers who have visited the East, that it is a pleasure to witness the typically Indian dance which is performed by Miss St. Denis and her troupe... A more faithful representation of Indian dancing has probably seldom if ever been seen here.²⁹

Perhaps the local aesthetes were happy to find Indian dance represented in a superior context, i.e., within the frames of colonial taste. Jane Sherman recalls that whereas the colonials seated in the front rows seemed to like all the dances, a definite response of excitement would arise when she was performing the *Dance of the Apsarases*, the first dance on the programme with Indian content³⁰. It is

consistently documented that of the dances in the Denishawn repertory that were performed in India, the *Dance of the Black and Gold Sari* and *Nautch* seem to have aroused the most excitement, in fact even provoked riots³¹. Doris Humphrey, one of the dancers on this tour, is said to have exclaimed:

Well, it's plain to be seen what kind of a program the Denishawns have to give in India. First Miss Ruth does four Black and Gold Saris. Then she rests a while and does at least six Nautches. After that we all can go home!³²

Both *Nautch* and the *Dance of the Black and Gold Sari* have been well described by Sherman and others but a viewing of the actual films of Ruth St Denis performing these dances, albeit at an advanced age, contributed several insights as to how these dances might have been received in India. They recreate a personal vision of India that both contradicts and confirms the legend and mystique of 'Miss Ruth'.

There seem to have been many versions of *Nautch*, varying according to the costume, the music, and the event. In the silent black-and-white film made by Carol Lynn at Jacob's Pillow in 1949-50, two distinct *Nautch* dances are clearly identifiable³³. Lynn's *White Nautch* shows St Denis in a white *ghagra*, *choli* and *chunni* worn in the north Indian way, except for the billowing ruffled petticoats under the *ghagra*! The movements are lyrical—with stylized stances, rhythmic footwork with ankle-bells, spiralling hand and wrist movements, all of which seem to vaguely recall both flamenco and Kathak dance. Inspired by the *Nautch* dancer that St Denis had seen at Coney Island, this dance does evoke her fascination with the atmosphere and qualities of Indian dance. St Denis performs *attami* with the *chaddar* held behind her head. The dance ends with skirt manipulations, a *salam* and a retreat. This beautifully performed dance seems to most closely fit descriptions of St Denis's first version of *Nautch*, as premièred in the Ronacher theatre in Vienna in February 1908.

In other versions of the *Nautch*, she added theatrical touches in order to draw attention to the conflict between the original religious intention of the dance and its debased circumstances³⁴. In Lynn's film, *Nautch in Authentic Costume*, St Denis wears a *ghagra-choli* of western India and appears to assume some of the attributes of street performers, mumbling and soliciting *baksheesh* and turning away in disdain when refused by an imaginary passerby.

While St Denis glamorized the *Nautch*, she did not romanticize the plight of these dancers, and her dance demonstrates that her sympathies were clearly with the *Nautch* dancer. Though her stage persona was inspirational, the content of her dances, particularly *Nautch* and *Sari*, aroused controversy because of her espousal of the pro-*Nautch* stance, and display of women's bodies set against the background of Indian culture.

In three films of the *Dance of the Black and Gold Sari* by Carol Lynn, James Baribault, and William Skipper, the choreography is consistent except for minor variations in performance phrasing and two alternate endings. Apparently, St Denis constructed her dances meticulously, but she allowed herself to vary phrasing

and interpretations according to her mood and the audience.

The Dance of the Black and Gold Sari was intended to show a humble shopgirl showing a rich sari to an imaginary patron, putting it on to demonstrate it and becoming temporarily transfigured with the joy of showing it off. The sari carried in St Denis's arms is thrown onto the floor with a ringmaster's flourish and in a few adept moves St Denis wraps it around herself, turning her back to the audience (a newly acquired modesty?) as she forms the pleats.

St Denis flings the *pallav* on the floor and straddles it with a movement that evokes the image of a cowgirl mounting a horse. In the next instant, this same misrepresented sari is transformed into a resplendent train as St Denis poses Javanese style with her hand magnificently hyperextended at the elbow, drawing attention to the parallel sweep of the fabric curving from her shoulder to the floor.

Perhaps a Western observer can more easily appreciate that this dance explores the visual and dramatic possibilities of six yards of sensuous fabric. Despite this admirable intention, the three filmed performances and the live recreation on Joyce Trisler's company even now startle post-colonial Indian sensibilities. These images, frozen from another era in celluloid, show a knock-kneed woman staggering on stage in what is considered underwear by Indian standards. Watching this dance is comparable to watching a strip act backwards.

In India, the sari epitomizes the ideal of womanhood. St Denis's dance violates, exploits, and loves this ideal with the all the innocence and ambivalence of a dreamstruck tourist. (In fact, the dance had been choreographed before St Denis came to India. She had learned to wear a sari from the Bhumgara family, who owned a store of Indian exports in New York.)

A problem endemic to intercultural performance (even within the same generation) is that one group never sees the performance in the same way as the other. Deborah Jowitt points out that many saw in this dance a woman gradually becoming transfigured by the splendour of the garment³⁵. A Calcutta newspaper supports this view:

The Dance of the Black and Gold Sari is as beautiful as it is enchanting. She has not only caught the Indian spirit, she is experiencing the joy of the spirit: and she is imparting that joy to her spectators³⁶.

However, it must be pointed out that in 1926, newspapers in English including the *Times of India* were run by British colonials, and their views did not necessarily reflect popular responses by Indians.

Imagine performances of *The Dance of the Black and Gold Sari* in India when antagonistic political and personal investments were converging on the issue of the dancing woman's body! The mere physical presence of the attractive St Denis, not-quite-dressed, like that of the very young ladies cavorting on stage barelegged in tunics, must have been far more startling in 1927 than in the films seen today, where the image is distanced by the medium itself and by changes in our sensibilities. Though reviews show that St Denis's sensual chasteness and liberational ideas about woman and dance were appreciated warmly, her dances could not but be perceived through the acquired layers of Islamic and Victorian

Courtesy: Uttara Asha Coorlawala.



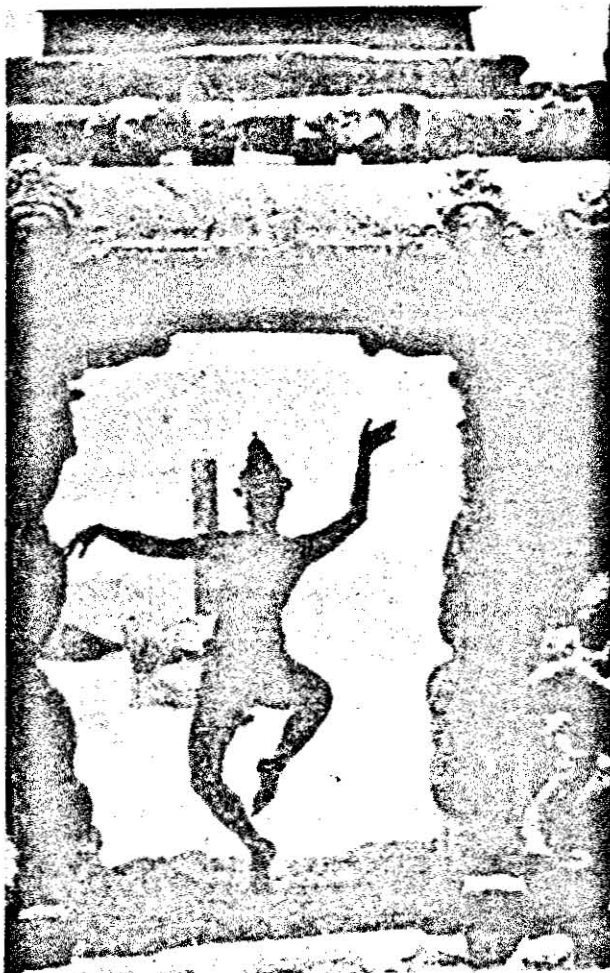
Above: "These are not a group of East Indian Nautch Dancers, but are Denishawn Dancers in the Sarees which they have brought from Benares and Bombay with Delhi jewellery..." Publicity photograph for the Denishawn company. Below: The Denishawn dancers in a village near Jabalpur, posing as Indian women fetching water. From left: Pauline Laurence, Doris Humphrey, Geordie Graham, Edith James, Mary Howry, Ernestine Day, Ann Douglas, Jane Sherman. (Photo: Ruth St Denis, 1926)



Ted Shawn in two poses from The Cosmic Dance of Shiva, photographed by Ruth St Denis (1926) at a south Indian temple.



Courtesy: Jane Sherman Leahac.



Courtesy: Jane Sherman Leahac.

morality overlaid on deeper traditional sensibilities.

Sherman herself concurs that as the tour continued, the possibility gradually dawned on her that the tumultuous reception that this dance was accorded in India could have been because the audiences were excited to see a white woman on stage, in public and dressed uncharacteristically. Sherman recalls that the best seats in the houses were occupied by colonials who were delighted to see some Western art-dance (for travelling conditions were hard and performing groups from the West were a rare phenomenon)³⁷. The balconies and seating at the back were filled by the Indian population, whose concerns during that time involved strong and mixed feelings of resentment against the British combined with admiration for their accomplishments.

It is likely that St Denis did, as claimed, stimulate people in India to think afresh about their own heritage. St Denis's *Nautch* (still accessible on film) demonstrated that a socially undesirable ritual could be presented on the public stage as a form of art and so preceded the preoccupation of many Indian choreographers with presenting themes about regressive social customs. The intimate and devotional feeling that suffused St Denis's danced *pūja* titled *Incense* remains deeply moving, but unfortunately this dance was not on the Denishawn programme in India. Reviews and events indicate that St Denis moved and startled a vast public with short-lived memories very deeply, but she did not directly inspire any protégés in India to perpetuate her contribution. Rabindranath Tagore requested in vain that she remain in India and teach at Visva-Bharati. Many other social and political factors, mainly Independence, also contributed to rekindling India's pride in its now flourishing dance forms. Vallathol, Tagore, Rukmini Devi and many others effectively revitalized the local forms and brought them to national attention.

Pavlova, however, directly inspired three of the moving forces in the revival of Indian dance. She apparently met Rukmini Devi Arundale socially on a luxury liner somewhere between Australia and London, and urged her to study Indian dance³⁸. So it came about that Rukmini Devi studied Sadir dance, which she later renamed Bharatanatyam and performed in public. This Brahmin lady married to the British head of the Theosophical Society, Lord Arundale, opened the institution of dance, Kalakshetra, in Madras, where respectable young girls flocked to study an art that was revalidated by its disassociation from the Devadasis. This is considered a landmark in Indian dance history, and Rukmini Devi along with the poet Vallathol and Uday Shankar are known as the prime movers in the renaissance of Indian dance. It is now understandable that Rukmini Devi with her concern for propriety preferred not to acknowledge the art of St Denis, for it highlighted the stigma that Rukmini Devi was to 'purge' from the dance even as it was being renamed a national art (Bharatanatyam)³⁹. A year later, when Pavlova's performances in India followed those of Denishawn, her art was not controversial. She brought to India the ethereal impact of her *Dying Swan*, which corresponded with the spiritual image that Indian reconstructionists were claiming for their own art forms.

During her visit to India, Pavlova also influenced Leela Sokhey, a young and



Courtesy: Uttara Asha Coorlawala

Ted Shawn and Ruth St Denis in 1915: photograph from their golden anniversary programme souvenir (1964).

beautiful socialite, to study Kathak seriously. Leela Sokhey went on to perform with a stage name, Menaka, and her theatrical Indian dance productions were highly acclaimed in Europe and India. In 1922 Pavlova invited a young Indian art student to perform the role of Krishna in her new Indian ballet and to choreograph two dances, *Krishna and Radha* and *A Hindu Wedding*. She was thus responsible for Uday Shankar's switch to his pathbreaking and momentous career in dance⁴⁰.

Perhaps St Denis's real and persistent effect on the revival of Indian dance is via the indirect route of bringing this ethos to the awareness of a vast public outside in a way that audiences could easily understand. In all the arts and literature, Orientals—the Eastern cultures that fell between the Suez canal and the Pacific Ocean—were perceived as the superior possessors of ancient wisdom, but treated as inferior peoples, ignorant of the power of the new knowledge systems of scientific development and industrialization. Even the generous Pavlova could not help expressing herself in the power-oriented thought of her culture:

The East had always fascinated me. One of the greatest ambitions remaining to me was to subjugate the Orient to my art, proving its power over people of any race or color.⁴¹

St Denis, however, seems to have avoided the trap of the dominant ethos. In the entry in her diary for 23 November 1926, at the end of the long tour of the 'Orient', she evaluates the confrontation between her romanticized ideals and the reality:

I had dreamed of India long, lived in the essence of her wisdom and beauty, seen through the soul of her artists so continually that it was a perilous thing to put these dreams to the test—these marvellous and fantastic dreams which I had built up in my own mind, and had already to some degree expressed in my Indian dances.

I am beginning to see that I already possessed the soul of India right here in America, through the medium of the language of her artists: that the India I had adored... no longer existed—or rather it existed now for me much more intensely in the depth of my own spirit than in... the politicians shouting in the assemblies or in the mobs silently resisting the government... A curious truth is beginning to dawn on me: I see that I was sent to the Orient to give a truth as well as receive one...⁴²

During St Denis's solo career, from 1906 to 1915, she had created several dances of these visions of India. Her dances were unashamedly inauthentic, and reflected her own personality, combining down-to-earth pragmatism with philosophizing, sensuality with chaste saintliness. Her lively and personalized Nautch dances differed greatly from the sentimental, idealized 'vestal virgins' of Indian temples who sacrificed themselves for spirituality and love in Delibes' opera *Lakmé* and Petipa's ballet *La Bayadère*. The choreography and movement in her dances *Incense* and *Yogi* are extremely simple, but the dances communicate her absorption with the Indian philosophical and devotional ethos. In *The Cobras*, she wears long black gloves with sparkling 'eyes' sewn on them, and transforms her hands into snakes. This dance of the hands hovers between the amazing and the eccentric! While St Denis's dances about India transcended the Orientalist vision of

her time because of her personal and sincere involvement with the subjects she portrayed, they still created another kind of Oriental vision.

It was St Denis who first aestheticized Indian dance for the new public of Europe and the United States, who continued for generations to look at Indian dance through glasses initially tinted by her vision. St Denis's dances preceded Pavlova's work with Uday Shankar in Europe by seven years. Pavlova had known about, if not been influenced by, Ruth St Denis's success with Indian dances in Europe for, as Deborah Jowitt points out, "One mysterious link between St Denis and Pavlova is Roshanara, who died young in 1926". On a programme that Pavlova showed around England, the repertory included such dances by Roshanara as an *Incense Dance*, a *Nautch Dance*, and a *Hindu Snake Dance*. And Jowitt adds that clippings about these performances were found in St Denis's scrapbook⁴³.

St Denis propagated a positive image of Indian dance forms outside India. In 1962, Ram Gopal, who made his career in London, acknowledged her contribution to the British public's awareness of Indian dance in his article 'Eastern Dances for Western Dancers' in the *Dancing Times*, while Shirada Narghis writing for *Dance Magazine* in August 1945 also praised her work:

Ruth St Denis by her life-long devotion to the philosophic depth and import of Indian's dance, and La Meri by her technical faithfulness are perpetuating in America the high standards of a carefully evolved art.

Together St Denis, La Meri, and Ted Shawn with his organizational talent created a place for Indian dance in the American educational system. At Jacob's Pillow, every performance was programmed with equal time for classical ballet, modern dance, and a national art-dance form. In order to educate audiences who saw all the classical art-dances of non-Western cultures as folk dances, La Meri coined the term 'ethnic dance' to stand for art-dances. This 'ethnic dance' was introduced into the curricula of many American educational institutions with dance programmes. (Use of this term is now deemed incorrect, because it implies that the dance so designated is of a subordinate culture: in effect, the term has come to represent that which it was designed to refute.)

Following St Denis, Pavlova, and Uday Shankar, many other dancers performing in Europe, like Ram Gopal, Mrinalini Sarabhai and Ragini Devi, and in the United States La Meri, Bhaskar and Matteo paid more attention to authentic technique. Yet St Denis's vision remained the initial yardstick of what is Indian for several generations, and then of the pseudo-Indian for the generations that followed.

One might say that Indian dance is an image reflected in two mirrors—East and West—opposite each other. As the image multiplies into many variations of itself, it becomes impossible to determine which mirror it is in. When one image exclusively is selected, it usually reflects the perspective and image of the one who is looking.

In a series of expanding repercussions and dialogues between India and the West, each exchange modifies and influences the following one. Audiences abroad consistently expect to see an ancient ('beyond criticism'), timeless (read 'unchang-

ing'), mysterious ('incomprehensible'), spiritual (read 'movements that are easy to execute'), beautiful, ecstatic, complex art form. Even now, the dances that India exports to the West are largely selected (by Western and Indian impresarios) as they correspond to Western concepts of what Indian dance should be. In India, this process is legitimized by its rewards: performances abroad, acclaim, and a sense of self defined against the Western 'other'. Dancers acclaimed outside India return to a new level of acceptance and respect for their art within India. The visions and expectations of non-Indian presenters whose first formative and definitive concepts of Indian dance were gleaned from the Indian presentations of St Denis continue to function as self-fulfilling prophecies. In this way her influence lingers, both in the external reflection and in the internal processes. □

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NOTES

1. Christina Lundberg Schlundt: *The Professional Appearances of Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn*. Dance Collection, New York Public Library, MSS, 1962.
2. Walter Terry: *The Saturday Review*, 3 December 1975.
3. *Times of India*, Bombay, quoted in 'Denishawn in the East', an article in *Dancing Times*, London, 1927, p. 472.
4. Suzanne Shelton: *Divine Dancer: A Biography of Ruth St. Denis* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), p. 199.
5. Sunil Kothari: 'History, Roots, Growth and Revival', *Bharata Natyam: Indian Classical Dance Art* (Bombay, India: Tata Press, 1979), p. 24. Mohan Khokar: 'Dance in Transition, The Pioneers', *Marg: Trends and Transitions in Indian Art*, Vol. XXXVI. No. 2, ed. Saryu V. Doshi (Bombay: Tata Press, 1984), pp. 44-49. Carmen Kagal: 'Indian Interlude in Modern dance', *Span* (New Delhi: United States Information Agency). Sunil Kothari does not credit St Denis with inspiring a renaissance of interest in Indian dance in his reference to this visit. Mohan Khokar and Carmen Kagal refer to the Indian element and influence in Ruth St Denis's work, but not to its impact on Indian dance.
6. Interviews and discussions with Jamshed J. Bhabha, Bombay House, Bombay, February 1989 and 1975. J.J. Bhabha is Honorary Director of the National Centre for Performing Arts, Bombay, and serves on various national and international committees on subjects related to Indian art.
7. Mohan Khokar: *Marg: Trends and Transitions*, p. 43. Keith Money: *Pavlova* (New York: Knopf, 1982), p. 312. Ruth St Denis's *An Unfinished Life—An Autobiography* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1939), p. 287. Maureen Fleming: 'An interview with Ruth St. Denis' (*The Dancing*

- Times*, London, 1926). Ted Shawn: *Gods who Dance*. Jane Sherman, *Soaring—the Diary and Letters of a Denishawn Dancer in the Far East 1925–26* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1976), p. 99.
8. Kapila Vatsyayan: 'Aesthetic Theories Underlying Asian Performing Arts', MSS 1984, p. 2. Interview with Dr. Narayana Menon, 27 January 1989. See also Sunil Kothari: *Bharata Natyam* (1979), Sunil Kothari: *Kathak* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1989), pp. 1–82.
 9. Ruth St Denis: *An Unfinished Life*, p. 286.
 10. In the legalized houses of prostitution in Bombay, services are rendered in chambers partitioned with bars.
 11. Jane Sherman, *Soaring* (1976), p. 99.
 12. *Denishawn Dancers in India* by Ted Shawn (16-mm silent black-and-white film, 6 minutes, 1926).
 13. Kothari 1989, p. 37.
 14. Kuchipudi is traditionally a dance-drama performed by males only. Today, a reconstructed solo dance format, as in Bharatanatyam, is danced by women in urban theatres.
 15. Pran Neville: 'The Nautch Girl and The Sahib', *India Magazine* (Jan. 1990), pp. 42–52.
 16. Balasaraswati, Swarnasaraswati, Varalakshmi, Bhanumati, Jeevaratnam, Kayalakshmi, Pattu, Saranayaki, etc. are listed by Khokar as some of the exceptions. Khokar: *Marg: Trends and Transitions*, 1984, p. 70.
 17. Frédérique Apffel Marglin: *Wives of the God-King* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). Marglin's research on the Devadasis of Orissa also confirms that official accounts of this period did not distinguish between the circumstances and levels of artistry of dancing-girl prostitutes, Nautch women, and the Devadasis who in some parts of India, as in Orissa, still performed only in temples.
 18. Amrit Srinivasan: "Temple 'Prostitution' and Reform: An Examination of the Ethnographic, Historical and Textual Content of the Devadasis of Tamilnadu, South India". Diss. (U.K.: Cambridge University, Wolfson College), 1984, pp. 184–216.
 19. 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (July 6–12, 1885) was a report on the slave trade of young English girls. Cited by Duncan Crow: *The Victorian Woman* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), pp. 258–268; and referred to by Phillipa Levine: *Victorian Feminism 1850–1900* (London: Hutchinson Press, 1987, pp. 148–151).
 20. Liddle and Joshi: *Daughters of Independence*, pp. 27, 31.
 21. Marglin: *Wives of the God-King*, p. 8.
 22. The term 'Backward classes' distinguishes this non-Brahmin group from the landed politically active 'Forward non-Brahmin classes' who comprised the Justice Party and enacted many reforms. The 'Depressed classes' refers to the 'untouchables'. All these terms are used by Srinivasan who reflects the terms found in the various Imperial Census Reports dating 1871–1931 and the *Manuals or Gazetteer's* for the various districts that were brought out as late as the early 20th century. Srinivasan, p. 45.

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23. Non-dancing wives in the community were subject to the same stringent regulations as the rest of Indian women concerning education and life-style. Only those women were selected for dedication who were considered to have talent and beauty.
24. Amrit Srinivasan: 'Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XX, No. 44, 3 November 1985.
25. Marglin, p. 8.
26. Christina Lundberg Schlundt: *The Professional Appearances of Ruth St Denis and Ted Shawn*, 1962. Jane Sherman: *Denishawn: The Enduring Influence*. (Boston: Twayne Publishers), pp. 76, 81.
27. Ruth St Denis: 'Music Visualization', *Denishawn Magazine*, Vol. I. No. 3, Spring 1925.
28. Jane Sherman: *Drama of Denishawn* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), p. 31.
29. Ahmed Alley: *Rangoon Daily News*, quoted in Ruth St. Denis's *Unfinished Life*, p. 283.
30. Telephone interview with Jane Sherman, 5 May 1991.
31. Ted Shawn: *One Thousand and One Night Stands* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1960), p. 188. Doris Humphrey quoted in St Denis's *An Unfinished Life*, p. 287. Jane Sherman: *The Drama of Denishawn*, p. 81. Though not listed on the Secunderabad programme, Shawn, Humphrey, Sherman, and St Denis affirm that *Dance of the Black and Gold Sari* was performed at practically every performance because of its phenomenal success.
33. Ruth St Denis: *An Unfinished Life*, p. 287.
34. The *Green Nautch*, the *Palace Nautch*, the *White Nautch*, the *Street Nautch*, the *Nautch in Authentic Costume* are some of the names by which this dance has been identified. The film *A Visit with RSD and Ted Shawn* (ca 1960) has two similar versions of the *Nautch in White Costume*, set to the music of the American composer Charles Wakefield Cadman. These dances are longer than the Lynn version, and seem to combine the two distinctive versions. Walter Terry differentiates between a *Nautch* that precedes the *Cadman Nautch* and the *Cadman Nautch* premiered at the Academy of Lynchburg, Va., on 15 May 1922. Terry insists that all the *Nautch* dances are variations of the same dance, and that the different names are simply in deference to the costume in which it was performed. Walter Terry: *Miss Ruth, The More Living Life of Ruth St. Denis*, (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1969), p. 70. *A Visit with Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn* by Reuven Frank, NBC-TV, ca 1960. *Ruth St. Denis at Jacob's Pillow, Mass.* by Carol Lynn. *The First Lady of American Dance: Ruth St. Denis* by William Skipper, 1956.
35. Deborah Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1988), p. 138.
36. Jane Sherman: *The Drama of Denishawn*, p. 82.
37. Interview with Jane Sherman on 5 May 1991.
38. This took place during Pavlova's tour of Japan and the Far East in 1922.
39. Bharata refers to Bharata the sage, attributed with the authorship of the *Natyashastra*. Bharata is also the Sanskrit name for India.

40. Mohan Khokar: *His Dance His Life—A Portrait of Uday Shankar* (New Delhi: Himalayan Books, 1983), pp. 29–30. Joan L. Erdman's recent paper 'Performance as Translation: Uday Shankar in the West' in *The Drama Review* (New York: 31.1, Spring 1987) makes similar connections between St Denis, Pavlova, and Uday Shankar.
41. Margot Fonteyn: *Pavlova—Portrait of a Dancer* (New York: Viking Press, 1984), p. 105.
42. St Denis: *Unfinished Life*, p. 302.
43. Deborah Jowitt: *Time and the Dancing Image*, p. 147.

FILMS

- A Visit with Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn*: NBC-TV, Reuven Frank, ca 1960. 29 mins. sd. clr.
- Ruth St. Denis at Jacob's Pillow, Mass.*: 'White Nautch' 1950, 'Black and Gold Sari' 1950, and 'Nautch (in Authentic Costume)', 1949: Carol Lynn, b&w.
- The First Lady of American Dance: Ruth St. Denis*: William Skipper, 1956.
- India Dances*: Ted Shawn, 1926. 15 mins. si., b&w, 16 mm.